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ABSTRACT

"CIVITAS" is a curriculum framework that specifies core ideas for civic education in the U.S. constitutional democracy. It reviews what adults should know and be able to do to as effective citizens. CIVITAS was developed by the Center for Civic Education in cooperation with the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. More than 60 scholars contributed to this project as consultants and authors of various parts of the book "CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education." This ERIC Digest highlights core ideas in "CIVITAS" on the rationale for civic education. It also addresses educational goals and substantive ideas for teachers on civic virtue, civic participation skills, and civic knowledge. (DB)

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The Core Ideas of *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education*

by Charles F. Bahmueller

CIVITAS is a framework that specifies core ideas for civic education in our American constitutional democracy. It states what adults will ideally know and be able to do to be effective democratic citizens.

CIVITAS was developed by the Center for Civic Education in cooperation with the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts. More than 60 scholars contributed to this project as consultants and authors of various parts of *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education*. This ERIC Digest highlights core ideas in **CIVITAS** on the rationale for civic education. It also addresses educational goals and substantive ideas for teachers and learners on civic virtue, civic participation skills, and civic knowledge.

The Rationale for Civic Education. Civic education in a democracy is education in self-government, which means active participation and not passive acquiescence in the actions of others. The health of the polity requires the widest possible participation of its citizens consistent with the common good and the protection of individual rights. No one's civic potential can be fulfilled without forming and maintaining an intention to pursue the common good; to protect individuals from unconstitutional abuses by government and from attacks on their rights from any source, public or private; to seek the broad knowledge and wisdom that informs judgment of public affairs; and to develop the skill to use that knowledge effectively. Such values, perspectives, knowledge, and skill in civic matters make responsible and effective civic participation possible. Fostering these qualities constitutes the mission of civic education.

Civic education should consist of the intensive study and understanding of the nation's system of self-government, its values, commitments, and assumptions, and its relevant history; in short, it should involve the theory and practice of a free and open democratic society as it has developed in the United States of America. Civic education should treat the purposes of government, the nature of law, the way private behavior affects the public order and the political system, and the international context of politics. Developing civic participation skills is essential to fulfillment of the promise of constitutional democracy.

The revitalization of education for citizenship is especially timely. The failure of citizens to take part in elections at every level is just one indication of widespread disengagement of citizens from the political system. Americans tend to perceive the Constitution as a self-executing mechanism; its very success has created indifference in many citizens to investing themselves in the political system that sustains their prosperity and well-being. But it is a dangerous illusion to suppose that our American constitutional democracy is like a self-perpetuating machine. The reality is that the system requires careful attention and assiduous cultivation by knowledgeable, skillful, and virtuous citizens.

Many citizens, however, lack an adequate understanding of the core ideas of constitutional democracy. They need deeper knowledge of the American political system than is currently commonplace, both as a framework for judgment and as common ground for public discussion and virtuous and skillful participation.

Goals on Civic Virtue. The ultimate goal of **CIVITAS** is to enable students equipped with the requisite civic knowledge and the skills of civic participation to make their own commitment, carried to adulthood, to the civic values deemed necessary for nurturing American constitutional democracy. This goal is summarized in the term "civic virtue."

Civic virtue has an ancient lineage, rooted in the tradition of classical republicanism, which admonishes citizens to place the public good above private interest. America inherited this republican tradition of civic virtue in the course of its founding. The republic's founders also drew upon another political tradition, classical liberalism, which viewed the chief end of government as the protection of individual rights. **CIVITAS** argues that both the classical republican and liberal views of citizenship are legitimate elements in the historical spectrum of American civic values.

CIVITAS describes civic virtue in terms of civic dispositions and civic commitment. **Civic dispositions** refer to those attitudes and habits of mind of the citizen that are conducive to the healthy functioning and common good of the democratic system. Civic commitments refer to the freely given, reasoned commitment of the citizen to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

These commitments and dispositions are imperative for two reasons. First, they enable the political process to work effectively to promote the common good. Second, they contribute to the realization of the fundamental ideals of the American political system including protection of the rights of the individual. **CIVITAS** enumerates and discusses the civic dispositions and commitments to fundamental civic values and principles and provides an extended commentary on civic values.

Goals on Civic Participation Skills. Civic education's unique responsibility is not simply to increase civic participation but also to nurture competent and responsible participation. Civic participation should involve more than attempts to influence

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public policy. It must be based upon moral deliberation, knowledge, and reflective inquiry.

The framework emphasizes that the preservation of individual rights and furtherance of the common good depend upon an enlightened citizenry that participates in the common life of the political community, respecting its constitutional norms and adhering to its fundamental values. **CIVITAS** also stresses that the right to participate carries with it certain moral and political obligations.

CIVITAS is concerned with identifying and fostering the skills required for competent civic action, its adherence to constitutional values and limits, and its adherence to constitutional morality. Thus, the framework discusses three central aspects of active civic participation: governing and managing groups; monitoring public policy; and influencing public policy. It presents a full and detailed account of the step-by-step stages in the process of participation, from the decision to act to full involvement.

The framework's concept of civic participation adds a much-needed caveat to current thinking on the subject. The fulfillment of the democratic citizen's potential is increasingly thought to have occurred when the citizen acts within civil society, the wide arena of society at large, outside of the institutions and processes of government and politics. Broadly interpreted, civic participation involves the monitoring and influencing of the policies of any organization that significantly affects individual rights and the common good. But, while **CIVITAS** recognizes the value of civic action in this realm, it argues that the foundations of American democracy are imperiled to the extent that citizens withdraw from political institutions in favor of primary or exclusive involvement with the broader arena of civic activities in civil society. Neither sphere of participation should be ignored.

Goals on Civic Knowledge. Knowledge is the necessary foundation of civic virtue and participation. Thus, the coverage of civic knowledge in the framework is extensive and ranges from considerations on the history of Western political thought and action to twentieth-century regimes, law, propaganda, television and politics, civil disobedience, religion and politics, subjects in American government, and much more. The criterion used to include and exclude subject matter was a simple question: What should an individual ideally know in order to be an effective citizen? The framework developers did not expect an adult, still less a student, to know everything in the extensive body of knowledge presented. However, the adult citizen should have a sound working knowledge of the main points.

Of special importance for the curriculum envisaged by **CIVITAS** is the three-fold division of the subjects presented in the civic knowledge section of this volume. Each section opens with the main ideas of the subject—the "conceptual perspective." It is followed by a "historical perspective" and a "contemporary perspective," which are designed to inform the reader of the current significance of the concepts and the historical development of these ideas.

Receiving attention in this part of the framework are core subjects of American government and politics, such as Congress and the presidency, the judicial system, bureaucracy, state and local politics, federalism, the role of the press, and so forth. There are pieces on morality and politics, economics, geography, religion and public life, gender issues, America and the international system, and racial and ethnic diversity. In addition, an extensive section discusses a number of aspects of law, from a conceptual and historical comparison of common and civil law systems to a presentation of the concepts and history of international law. Several non-Western subjects are covered in the framework. China is used as an example of non-Western concepts of the state, and the history of China in the twentieth century, especially China under communism, is discussed. Subjects treated under the heading of "informal institutions and processes of government" include television and politics, propaganda, environmental issues, public opinion and the informal processes of Washington politics, and other subjects.

The "Civic Knowledge" section concludes with "The Role of the Citizen." **CIVITAS** emphasizes the responsibilities of citizens and contains a conceptual and historical account of individual rights and human rights. The framework closes with a general critical assessment of the current state of civic life in the United States of America that underscores the importance of a regenerated concept of citizenship in a constitutional democracy.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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